

Education Committee

SUPPORT: Executive Budget Charter School Per Pupil Increase

Wednesday, March 3, 2021

Hello members of the Education Committee,

My name is Ashley Santiago. My family and I have been residents of Bridgeport for more than three decades.

I'm a parent of two boys who attended Blackham School and John Winthrop School. They are currently enrolled at Great Oaks Charter and New Beginning Family Academy in Bridgeport. It's not a secret in my family that I have no love for the public school system.

I am here not only to support equity in education for all CT children including my own that attend public charters and have been underfunded for years. I am also here making myself vulnerable by sharing the horrific experience our family endured as a direct result of living in a disadvantaged community.

My older son Joshua attended Blackham School from kindergarten to the 5th grade. I realized my son needed help with reading and math. I requested a PPT to have him test it at the time the principal told me no, to give him time. Every day I saw my son struggle and cry. The following year when Joshua returned as a first grader his teacher approached me and shared that she too noticed Joshua was struggling in reading and math. So once again I requested a PPT to have my child tested. Once the results came in, an IEP was finally put in place.

Over the years at Blackham my son was bullied and no one did anything to make him feel safe. In the fifth grade my son was diagnosed with Von Willebrand's Disease. At that time his father and I had not discussed with Joshua what was going on with him, but we did go to school to let them know. A couple of days later I went to pick up Joshua at school, he had been physically assaulted during recess. As I walked into the principal's office the first thing the principal said to me was "Ms. Santiago I don't have time to deal with this or to speak to you right now". So of course I went down to the board of education and wrote up a complaint. I took my son to the emergency room and to the police station. The following day when I dropped off my son at school the principal came running to me saying "Miss Santiago can we discuss what happened yesterday". I answered no you may contact my attorney.

The reason why my son was physically attacked was that a few students that were in the nurse's office overheard the nurse speaking to another clinician about my son having Von willebrand's disease. She had broken the HIPAA privacy rule. For those who are not aware of Von Willebrand's disease it's a bleeding disorder- my son bleeds internally- he does not form blood clots without the help of proper medication. At that time Joshua was also epileptic- he has been clear epilepsy free since January of 2020! Although there was an IEP finally in place for Joshua he was not getting pulled out or given extra time on his assignments or modified work. Exactly 3 days before Joshua entered the sixth grade, Great Oaks charter called letting me know that Joshua was accepted into the charter school system. **I had felt so helpless that I could not do more for my son. So many other parents are in the same situation.**

The first semester at Great Oaks was very difficult for Joshua but I couldn't be more proud of him, with the hard work of his teachers and fellows-Joshua made the honor roll!

Joshua feels safe, content, and feels confident to continue his accomplishments at Great Oaks Charter School. All children should feel the same way in their schools.

My youngest son Ryan was showing the same difficulties as his brother in reading and math. My son attended John Winthrop School ,I again requested a PPT after the first marking period, where his teacher also approached me with concerns. I was given a PPT date in December before the pandemic. I remember walking in with my folders and documents since I had to have my son privately tested since the school refused to test him for a learning disability. Why I ask, should parents be forced to do this? I did send in copies of the report to the teacher and special ed coordinator. They were offering me a 504 and not an IEP. When I questioned why a 504, all they could say was that my son had ADHD. Both my children have ADHD but they don't need a 504. They would not give me an IEP, and told me that they will just keep an eye out for him. Before I left, the principal had the audacity to tell me,, "Don't worry, maybe he's just confused due to the languages he speaks. I just stared at her and asked, what was she talking about.? She responds it" I too speak Portuguese, Spanish, and English". I responded back by telling her, "Because of people like you, who are ignorant **This is the reason why I fight.. so that my children won't fall through the cracks in the system!**

Both my children are strong in all three languages and never have they confused the languages. Ryan is in the first grade and has been withdrawn from John Winthrop School and enrolled in New Beginnings Family Academy. With the help of Ryan's therapist and his school teachers at New beginnings Family Academy my son is now on his way to get aPPT date so that I can sign an IEP that will meet his needs.

To know that public charters are falsely attacked for not serving kids with special needs is outrageous. It was due to the help and support my children received at their charters school, that they now have the services they need.

Today you heard my story, what if I had no choice for my kids? I am grateful that I do!

But what about those who don't?

I stand today to ask this committee to eradicate inequity in education- which hurts our most vulnerable. I ask that all of Connecticut children be treated as equal, with a focus on their needs and nothing else.

I stand in support of SB 948, SB 949 and SB 886.

Best regards,

Ashley Santiago and Family